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The financial planning applications advisors can't do without
By Rob Burgess
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Traditionally, investment management has been the bread and butter of wealth management firms' service offerings.

But for many advisors, that value proposition is insufficient without at least some level of financial planning. Lawrence D. Sprung, founder of Mitlin Financial in Hauppauge, New York, counts himself among that cohort.

"I believe families are no longer simply looking for asset management help and are interested in solutions that will help them position their assets in a way that is in line with their long-term goals and financial plan," he said.

Daniel P. Lash, partner and financial advisor with VLP Financial Advisors in Vienna, Virginia, said his firm has offered financial planning since its inception almost 30 years ago. He said all VLP advisors are required to attain their CFP certifications, "as we feel that investment management and financial planning work in tandem."

Tushar Kumar, a private wealth advisor with Twin Peaks Wealth Advisors in San Francisco, said his firm doesn't consider financial planning an add-on but rather sees it as the "foundation."

"Without a plan, investment advice can feel disconnected," he said. "With a plan, everything has context. It's how we help clients make decisions with clarity and confidence."

Marissa Beyer, senior wealth advisor and partner at Fidato Wealth in Middleburg Heights, Ohio, said without creating a comprehensive financial plan to fully understand a client's needs, goals and objectives, advisors cannot have a basis for determining how investments need to be positioned.

"Understanding their risk tolerance and capacity for risk, and confirming what rate of the return the investments need to generate in order for the plan to be successful, is an integral piece of how investments affect planning," she said. "Think of investments as the gasoline and the financial plan is the car; you need gasoline for the car to run, but you need a car in order to actually get to your destination. Making sure you have a full tank of gas, an established investment philosophy, is important, but it doesn't matter how fancy the gasoline is if you don't have a fully working, well-constructed car — the financial plan — you cannot achieve your goals."

Beyond spreadsheets — the tools firms use for financial planning

According to the recently released Cerulli Associates report "State of U.S. Wealth Management Technology 2025," general financial planning software is used by 92% of advisor practices that offer the service.

Lash said his firm uses MoneyGuidePro for goals-based financial planning, Trayecto for stock options and Holistiplan for tax planning, among others.

"Technology has allowed us to more quickly and consistently provide planning for clients over the years," he said. "Calling yourself a financial advisor and only dealing with investments is going the way of the dinosaur."

Kumar said though Twin Peaks has been offering financial planning since the start, over time the firm has refined its tech stack to deliver more personalized, integrated advice: eMoney Advisor as the primary financial planning platform, EncorEstate Plans to help clients visualize and structure their legacy goals, and Holistiplan for tax planning.

Brian Heckert, senior advisor and managing director at FSM Wealth in Nashville, Illinois, said when he started in this profession four decades ago, most financial planning programs were based upon Lotus 1-2-3 and advisors printed the results on a dot matrix printer. Since 2005, the firm has been using eMoney Advisor.

"We have been able to adapt eMoney to complex needs as well as simple gap analysis situations," he said. "It is both specialized for those who need it and generalized for those who don't. We have found many advisors are turned off by the complexity of the data input, but we embrace it and make it less daunting for the client by assisting with the input."

Scooter Thomas, financial advisor with Savant Wealth Management in Birmingham, Alabama, said his firm also uses eMoney Advisor as its financial planning software, "which is particularly effective for math-based planning scenarios such as private stock options, restricted stock, net unrealized appreciation, preferred stock, stock grants and more."

"However, we acknowledge that eMoney is less adept at handling more human or behavior-specific planning needs, such as estate planning," he said.

Estate, stock-option planning are growing offerings

Though they are still in the minority among advisors who provide financial planning services, those who utilize more specialized financial planning technology, such as stock option planning (41%) and estate planning (45%), are on the rise, according to Cerulli.

Kumar said his firm uses a combination of Equity Simplified and Holistiplan for stock-based compensation.

"Since we advise clients who are going through IPOs, stock option planning is key for us," he said.

James F. Thomas, founder and chief planning officer of Superior Planning in San Diego, said estate planning is the often-overlooked key to engaging clients in a "big-picture sticky financial planning relationship."

"What follows is an ongoing collaborative process between client and planner that positions them both to plan, implement, and adapt to life's changes while maintaining a focus on desired outcomes," he said. "It all starts by asking prospective client family leaders two vital questions, 'Who are you?' and 'What do you want?'"

Thomas said his firm has a dedicated team of lawyers who augment its advisors with personalized estate planning services.

"This ensures that we can offer comprehensive and emotionally intelligent planning solutions to our clients," he said.